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THE 1885 RESISTANCE BATTLES

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Grievance

The Metis of the North West Territories submitted petitions to the Federal Government. This process of asking for land titles had been going on for a number of years. There were other parties of people with similar concerns. These were the settlers and Indians of the North West. Over the years petitions from various groups were sent to Ottawa. The Macdonald Government failed to act on the requests put forward from the people. ¹This led to the recalling of Louis Riel to Saskatchewan.

Riel accepted the invitation from the Metis of Batoche to return to Saskatchewan. He returned with the intention of organizing a non-violent movement of people against the policies of the Federal Government of Canada. All the people of the North West, the settlers, Indians and the Metis were part of his plans in the movement. Shortly after his return, Riel had successful community meetings. Riel, at these meetings, did not indicate that violence was part of his plan in the movement. The meetings were attended by settlers, Indians and the Metis. As a result of the meetings, it was agreed by all parties to form a central control committee. This committee was to act as a lobbying body in negotiations with the government.

The Indians were not satisfied with the living conditions set out by the Government in their treaties. The Chiefs sought advice from Riel. The chiefs were Big Bear of the Battleford area, who succeeded in meeting with Riel to discuss his problems; another was Chief Piapot of the Qu-Appelle Indians, who attempted to consult with Riel, which was blocked by a deputation of other Saskatchewan Indians. Their grievance was similar to that of the Metis which was the land question. These tribes were not satisfied with the treaty regulations set by the Government. The lands given them in exchange for their signatures did not meet their survival needs. The Indian chiefs watched their people dying of starvation. They wanted a non-violent negotiation with the Government. The signing of the treaties meant the Chiefs had to be true to their words of peace.

Many people of importance knew the living conditions of the people in the North West movement. People like Inspector Crozier of Fort Carlton, and Father Andre had urged the Government to act on the petitions put forward by the people. These warnings fell upon deaf ears. The most the Government promised to do was look into the matter of the Half-Breeds who had not participated in the Manitoba scrip settlement. The Metis had no confidence in

the promises of the Macdonald Government. This statement of promises had been evident since 1878 without any form of action. Since action was not forthcoming in dealing with the petitions, Riel set out to form a Provisional Government. The Metis were also talking of taking up arms against the Canadian Government at this point of negotiations. On March 18, Riel started the process of forming a Provisional Government. Sixteen of the Metis became members of the council that day, including Gabriel Dumont. He became military commander of the Metis force.

Call to Arms

At a meeting held at Batoche, March 21st, the Provisional Government Council made the decision to take up arms. The official statement read: "Justice commands us to take up arms" and it was signed by fifteen council members. ³ Prior to this decision, Riel had made an appeal to the English Half-Breeds and settlers. He presented his appeal on the 20th day of March at the Lindsay School House meeting. His appeal was as follows:

"Dear Brothers in Jesus Christ

The Ottawa Government has been maliciously ignoring the rights of the original half-breeds during fifteen years. The petitions which have been sent to that Government on that matter and concerning the grievance which our classes have against its policy are not listened to:... Those of the emigrants who have been long enough in this country to realize that Ottawa does not intend to govern the North West so much as to plunder it, are in sympathy with the movement. Let us all be firm in the support of right, humane and courageous, if in him to fight, just and equitable in our views, thus God and man will be with us, and we will be successful.

Dear Brothers, the Council of the French Canadian half-breeds, now under arms at St. Anthony and in the Saskatchewan, have been most happy to receive your friendly communications through your Messrs. Scott, Ross and William D...Justice commands us to take up arms." ⁴

The decision to take up arms had been provoked by Lawrence Clarke, chief factor of Fort Carlton and negotiator for the Metis. When Clarke returned from Ottawa after negotiations with the Government, he made a statement to the Metis that the Government was answering their petition with armed forces. This immediately led to the preparation for the defence of Metis land and lives. ⁵



Gabriel Dumont, R.C.M.P. Museum.

Preparation for Battle

Since it was the decision of the newly formed government to take up arms, preparations for defence began. Gabriel Dumont with his two assistants Joseph Delorme and Patric Tourand put the process in motion. On the 17th of March, the Provisional Government seized the Batoche local

church, which they used for headquarters. ⁶ Hudson's Bay Company stores were weized, and settlers were asked to surrender their arms and ammunition. A privately-owned store by John Kerr at Batoche Crossing was seized. Other privately-owned stores in the area of Batoche were also raided. Necessary supplies required to strengthen the force were taken. This included guns, ammunition, axes and anything that could have been used in battle, as well as food. ⁷The next move of the Metis was to capture Fort Carlton which had supples that they needed. To avoid blood-shed in capturing the fort, Riel requested Crozier to surrender under certain terms. The terms of the surrender were sent to Crozier. He refused, and in return requested the surrender of Louis Riel. ⁸

Another tactic used in preparation was setting up guards on routes leading into Batoche. The purpose of this was to prevent people not supporting the movement getting into the settlement. Another reason was to intercept any supplies coming into Batoche. ⁹

Other methods used in the preparation process were putting the telegraph wires out of order. Trenches were dug in the area of trails leading into Batoche. These holes were large enough to hold two men. The men in the "foxholes" were sentries, and were responsible for protecting the villages. ¹⁰

While the Metis were busy gathering supplies and planning their strategy for defence, the Canadian Military were on their way. On March 14, Crozier sent a telegram requesting reinforcement. He feared the Metis were going to fight for their land rights.

Commissioner Irvine rode north from Regina with one hundred armed men as soon as the message was received. At the same time, Riel was strengthening his force by uniting the Metis at St. Laurent. Crozier knew the extra force was on its way, so he sent two people (Thomas McKay and Hillyard Mitchell) to talk to Riel in hope it would delay any action planned by the Metis army and to avoid bloodshed. His plan of delaying the action failed, for that day he rode against the Metis army in the Battle of Duck Lake. ¹¹

The Canadian Government was also preparing for action. On the 24th of March, Ottawa sent four hundred (400) men to Winnipeg. On March 27th, a day after the battle of Duck Lake, seven hundred (700) extra men were on their way west. The process of sending forces to the West continued. It was reported by the third week of April some 3,000 militia-men had made the long trek to the scene of action in the North West. ¹²

The Battles

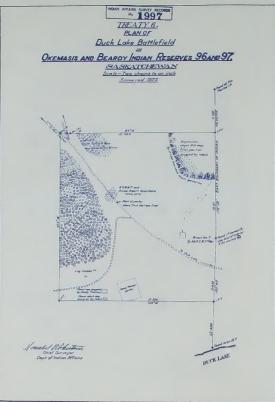
(Duck Lake, Fish Creek and Batoche)

Since the first books on the battles were written, historians have different opinions about the events which took place. They have tried to answer certain questions. Here are a few examples of these questions: Who fired that first shot? How many men did the Metis force have? Questions such as these have bothered people through the years. This brochure will describe the battles and accounts of the people who were engaged in them.

The First Battle

(Battle at Duck Lake)

On the 26th of March, a small party from Crozier's main force were met near Duck Lake by a small Metis force under Dumont's command. Both were on their way to get supplies from Duck Lake. Dumont demanded their surrender, but they refused. There were no shots fired, but the conversation between the two parties was hostile. The police returned to Fort Carlton reporting their encounter to Crozier. After this incident, the people of Prince Albert and Fort Carlton became concerned. The North West Mounted Police were accused of being cowards and the Prince Albert volunteers were anxious for action. The pride of the police force had been hurt. As a result of this, Crozier, against his better judgement, marched out to meet the rebel force on the same day. He had to restore the pride of the N.W.M.P. by enforcing the authority of the Canadian Government. He had a force of ninety-five men, including Prince Albert volunteers. ¹³ The two forces met near the settlement of Duck Lake. Neither Riel nor Crozier had planned an armed battle. Dumont sent his brother Isadore and an elder Indian to parley, while Crozier, Sgt. Brooks and Joseph McKay, the police interpreter went out to meet them. This parley turned into a ruckus and broke into open fire, this resulted in the death of Isadore Dumont and the Indian. After that first shot both parties were at the point of no return. The battle lasted for approximately one-half hour. ¹⁴ Crozier retreated after realizing he was in a disadvantaged position and losing men. This ended the Battle of Duck Lake. The following map drawn in 1922 gives an idea of the site of the battlefield at Duck Lake



Public Archives of Canada

The Fish Creek Battle

General Middleton marched his troops for Batoche from Fort Ou'Appelle on April 6th, 1885. The troops had spent four days at the fort, taking a crash course on firing their weapons. Many of the men had never fired a gun prior to their enlistment. The march was a treacherous one due to bad weather. The snow had begun to melt under the warm spring sun making the walk of two hundred and twenty miles almost impossible. He reached Gabriel's Crossing eleven days after his departure, covering one hundred and eighty miles. He spent two days at the Crossing preparing and exercising maneuvers for battle. These two days were a waste of precious time as it later turned out. The force of eight hundred now marched on the opposite banks of the South Saskatchewan River. Middleton's force was now heading towards Fish Creek. The split in the force deprived Middleton the service of his troops during the Battle of Fish Creek.

While the Canadian troops were marching, Dumont was preparing to take a stance against them. He and his men had been scouting the army since it left Fort Qu'Appelle. They knew at all times where the troops were and what their next moves were. The Metis were receiving reports from Jerome Henry, who accompanied the troops as a Government Freighter. Dumont wanted to execute a series of hit-and-run attacks, but file did not want him to leave headquarters. Riel feared his absence would weaken the force at Batoche.

Dumont could no longer hold his plan to encounter the troops. On the 23rd day of April, he informed Riel of his plan to ambush Middleton's force. On that same day, Dumont with a party of 200 rode out to set up his ambush. Later that day, fifty of the men returned to the headquarters with Riel. They had received news that Crozier had left Prince Albert to attack Batoche. The following morning, 130 of Dumont's party concealed themselves among bushes and in rifle pits at Fish Creek. Dumont, with 20 of the men, rode within a half mile of the troops. His plan was to draw the troops in the coulee and then fire on them from their concealed positions. 20 On the morning of the 24th, the troops drew closer to the ravine. Middleton's scouts were reporting signs of recent activities in the area of the Fish Creek ravines, when suddenly they were under fire. The rebels concealed at the edge of the creek valley had opened fire without orders from Dumont. His plan of ambush had failed. The Metis who were no doubt excited and frightened, had opened fire before Middleton led his force into the ravine. Middleton ordered his men to scatter along the ridge of the valley. The troops could not pinpoint the well hidden rebels. From their position the rebels were picking off their targets, who were easy to see against the sky. Middleton's army attacked and retreated in small groups on a number of occasions. He decided to withdraw after losing 55 of his 350 man force. As the troops retreated Dumont withdrew his force from the ravine. Dumont had gained another victory, losing only four men. ²¹

These are some of the accounts of people who were involved in the battle or at the scene of battle on April 24th, 1885. This report is taken from the diary of a soldier,

"April 24, Friday . . . we heard firing in from 9:30 a.m. We had run into some rebels, firing commenced imediately. Some of our scouts and cavelry (sic) were wounded and I believe two killed. The Creeds (sic) kept up a continual fire and so did we but it was almost impossible to see them, as they took cover in the bush. Went through some of their houses but did not disturb anything. It seemed as though they had just got up from breakfast." ²²

Middleton stated in his report to the Minister of Militia and Defence as follows:

I have had an affair with the rebels at this spot, on the east bank of the river. My advanced scouts were fired upon from a bluff, but we managed to hold our own till the main body arrived, when I took measures to repel the attack . . . We have captured a lot of their ponies, and have three or four apparently Indians and Half-Breeds in the corner of a bluff who have done a great deal of mischief, being evidently their best shots; and I am unwilling to lose more men . . . The killed and wounded are, I deeply regret to say, too numberous..."

"I do not know what the loss of the enemy was, but I doubt not it was severe, though from their great advantage of position and mode of fighting it might well be less than ours. I shall proceed tomorrow after burying the dead and sending the wounded back to Clarke's Cressing 25.

Another incident showed that the Metis were in desperate need of guns and ammunition. In the following report, written 50 years after the 1885 rebellion, T.E. Jackson, Prince Albert Pharmacist stated this:

"As soon as prayers were over they all hurried off to Fish Creek to see what had happened, and not having a doctor, a half-breed took me along in a buck board in order that I might render first-aid and bring back any wounded. He took me along the river trul from

From the geographic details of the map, the Metis force were at an advantage battle position. They occupied the ravines, wooded area and abandoned houses forming a semi-circle around the Northwest Mounted Police position. The map also illustrates the NWMP force to be in the open. ¹⁵

The following are accounts of people that were at the scene during the battle of Duck Lake. Gabriel Dumont had this to say about the battle:

"Once the fusillade began, we fired as often as we could. As for myself, I fired the twelve shots of my Winchester rifle, and had reloaded to get it into play again, when the English, stunned by the number of their dead, began to withdraw . . . Since in flight they would cross a clearing, I attempted to ambush, say to my men: 'Courage'. I'll make a few red-coats jump in their wagons. And I laughed — not because I took pleasure in killing, but to encourage my boys...
The sound of gunfire was heard at Batoche and Riel with 70 men hurried to help their brothers at Duck Lake "16"

Adding to the thirty men Dumont had with him, the rebel army now had a force of one hundred.

"While we fought, Riel sat on his horse, exposed to the bullets, armed only with a crucifix which he held in his hand. Gabriel's brother, now in command, called out to the men to pursue Crozier's force. Riel spoke out: "For the love of God, kill no more of them." He must have realized his non-violent movement was now turned into a bloodshed battle. Dumont's account had many interesting details related to the battle. ¹⁷ At this point, the Meish had lost five men leaving ninety-five men. Undoubtedly there were others wounded, but it wasn't recorded in Dumont's accounts.

The account of Crozier in a report requested by Lt. Col. Irvine states that;

"Sir — In reply to your Memorandum of this date I have the honor to inform you that on the morning of the 26th of March I sent a party to Duck Lake to procure a quantity of provisions and ammunition that were in the store of a trader, named Mitchess..." immediately got ready a party of one hundred strong to proceed to the relief of Stewart as I was moving

off Stewart's party came down the hill at the fort. I was informed that there were about one hundred marauding Half-Breeds at Duck Lake . . . Therefore I concluded to go to Duck Lake and get the provision and ammunition.

When within a mile and a half of Mitchell's store I was attacked by a force of Half Breeds estimated at the time at over two hundred in number but I have since been informed through rebel sources that There were at least three hundred and fifty of them." 18

This was the report of the battle at Duck Lake on March 26, 1885, by the commanding officer of the North West Mounted Police

Here is another account given by a Prince Albert Militiaman. He participated in the clash of arms at Duck Lake. This is what he remembered:

"On arriving (near Duck Lake) the scouts ... chased in by twenty or thirty horsemen, followed by a body of men on foot constantly increasing in numbers as others came from Duck Lake. Major Crozier halted his troops, and the police spread out to the left and the volunteers to the right of the road . . At the same time the rebels had now mostly left the road, and were getting under cover among the bluffs or groves in front of our men, and even around their flank. A number made their way into an empty log building to the right of our line, from which they poured a murderous fire on the volunteers. The cannon fired three shots; then, by a sad mistake, a shell was put in before the charge of powder, and the gun became useless until the engagement was over." ¹⁹

The men must have been very scared and nervous to make such a mistake. Besides being jumpy, they must have lacked military training. Trained men under fire do not usually panic. The account continues as such,

"The rebels' fire was very severe . . . The Indians and Half-Breeds fired with great coolness, dropping on their blankets and taking sure aim . . . orders were given to retreat. A rush was made for the road . . . and the force retreated, leaving nine men dead or lying on the field." "18a"

This was the battle of Duck Lake. The Metis had proven their skills in warfare. They not only won the battle of Duck Lake, they proved to themselves and the opposing force their ability to organize a quick effective defence.



Battle at Fish Creek, Canadian Illustrated War News Vol. 1 No. 14.

Batoche to Fish Creek and through the half-breed encampment where I saw the women cooking for the men in tents. I also noticed that they were melting lead from tea chests for bullets, and they had the moulds into which they poured the melted lead. This showed me that there could have been little or no organized preparation for an armed rebellion." ²⁴

Here are the accounts of Trottier and Gabriel Dumont of the rebel forces:

"When they came up I shook hands with them saying,
'We are only forty-eight, and I think many have been
killed . . . Then when our people had come, they (the
Metis) wanted to follow them, but I called out: 'Do not
follow them, we have done enough . . . When we got
together at the Touronds house I found out that there
had not been many of our people killed; ... only four
were missing ... I asked continually where my children
and nephews were, ... I will not leave you, I will go and
see my horse and then I will go to you.' 25

Gabriel's account:

"Mr. Champagne arrived . . . He reported police coming from the direction of Little Mountain, on the Fourche Road. He asked for thirty men to come . . . He asked Mr. Riel if he would come with them. Mr. Riel consented, asking for forty men. Nearly all the

people wanted to come away. In the end some fifty came . . . an Indian said to me: Do not leave us; if you do many will run away. I held on for a while; and then said to them: 'Try and fight yourselves for awhile; I will go and see our people, and I promise to come back to you. When I hear my men shouting sturdily I know they are in good heart." ²⁶

Dumont had won another victory over the Canadian Government Army on the 24th of April. The size of the rebel army was small in numbers but they were expert marksmen. They were also experienced in geurilla warfare. This was a skill which they developed through their years of travelling and hunting the buffalo. Even though they were small in numbers, they had an advantage in other ways. Their concealment in the ravines, with the sky as a background, exposed their target well.

Middleton had weakened the army by splitting the troops into two divisions. Not only was the army weakened, but they were marching on opposite sides of the river. This forced one of the divisions to come to the rescue of the other without access to a bridge crossing.

The well developed warfare and marksmanship of the Metis and the poor military plan of Middleton had caused the defeat of the Canadian Army in the first two battles of the North West Resistance.

The Battle of Batoche

The Battle of Batoche was the last major engagement between the Metis and the Canadian Army of 1885. It became the victory battle for the Canadian government

After the Battle of Fish Creek, Middleton regrouped his troops and camped a few miles from the battlefield. He camped there waiting for supplies and reinforcements. He had the opportunity of nursing the casualties while he was camped there.

On the 7th day of May, Middleton resumed his march for the rebel headquarters. Middleton had blanketed the South, East, and West side of the settlement by the third day of his march

On the 5th, the Northcote arrived on the shores of Clarke's Crossing. This steamer was scheduled to lead an attack in conjunction with Middleton's land troops. Both the troops and the Northcote were to launch their attack, which was scheduled for 9:00 a.m., May 9th, Middleton's plan was to have the Northcote attack to create a diversion for his troops. A communications system was set up using the whistle of the steamer. However, Dumont had plans of his own for the Northcote, he had the steamer under surveil-lance from the start. The Metis had stationed snipers along both sides of the river bank to deal with the steamer. The snipers were firing so intensely at the boat that the wheelsman did not dare look out the cabin. Not only did the Metis pour bullets on the Northcote but lowered the ferry cable stretched across the river. The cable was to stop the steamer, unfortunately it was not lowered enough to stop it. However, it did knock the smokestacks from the steamer causing it to catch on fire. Despite the heavy firing of the Metis the Northcote finally escaped never to be seen until the battle was over. The steamer was in trouble before the scheduled time of attack causing Middleton's plan to fail. If the plan had not failed. Batoche would have been under fire from all sides The Northcote was Canada's first naval force used in battle.

Middleton now realized that he would have to fight the Metis without the assistance of the Northcote. He marched his army towards the settlement, passing burning buildings without trouble until they were in firing range of the Megis guns. They came under heavy fire from the men in the rifle pits. They were unable to advance any further therefore retreated. This tactic of attack continued through the day, until Middleton realized he could not penetrate the Metis line of defence. He therefore called it quits at 1:00 p.m. on the first



General Middleton, Gabriel Dumont Library

The following day, May 10, the fighting was renewed. Middleton's troops made a series of attacks attempting to make the Metis use up their ammunition. Their efforts to take Batoche was not successful either on the second or third days of hattle

Finally on May 12, the last day of battle Middleton, knowing the Metis were out of ammunition ordered his men to cease fire. His orders were disobeyed and Lieut. Col. Straubenzie led a bayonet charge into the rifle pits. As a result of this charge many men on both sides lost their lives. ²⁷

Here are some accounts of the people who were involved in the Battle of Batoche. These accounts represent both sides of the stories told after it was over.

Here is what a Canadian eyewitness had to say about the first day's battle:

"It was painfully evident that we had not men enough. Owing to their position, one rebel was as good as ten volunteers, just as it was at Fish Creek . . our scouts captured Wm. Brush, a breed, who was hovering near our rear. He said he escaped from Riel three days before. He placed the rebel force at four hundred men, half of whom were Indians. Two hundred of them were on this side and two hundred on the other side of the river. The priest confirmed this."

Here is what Dumont had to say concerning the first day's battle

"We were about 175 men, apart from the squad of thirty men sent to keep an eye on the Northcote. The battle began at 9:00 in the morning and lasted all day without the enemy managing to advance

The cannon which they had set on a hill, at about a mile, threw its fire ceaselessly on Batoche, and to the other side of the river on Baker's house on which flew a flag of the Blessed Virgin, another flag of our Lord was in the midst of us, on the Council's house.

What contributed considerably to disconcert our soldiers was that the priest refused them all religious help, the soldiers, their wives and their children."

Here is what the newspapers had to say:

"On the last day came the gallant charge and the victory. Ours, (The Grenadiers, the 90th Batallion and the "Midlands",) was the most dismal of all camps. The ploughed earth had turned to dust . . . Hundreds of horses and cattle superimposed filthiness; water was scarce and not fit to drink; and the area was so limited that it was next to impossible for the troops, unless in

the trenches, to lose sight of the dead around the hospital, or to get out of earshot of the groans of the wounded. This camp had been under fire for sixty the 90th was mad. So were the Grenadiers, the Midlands and the artillery. I don't mean to say they were mutinous, but they had nearly reached the limit of their suffering. The officers were even more angered than the men because they knew the mettle of the troops. It was tacitly agreed among the field officers . that the next opportunity the rebels should be charged and driven back no matter what the orders to the contrary from the General commanding might be."

A surveyor's account is as follows:

"These pits extended down the river for nearly a mile and a half north of the ferry, and were strongly constructed and placed at short intervals. Here at the foot of the bank were afterwards found the remains of a Half-breed and Indian encampment in a state of great disorder, showing that they had not looked to the order of their going, but had gone quickly. It was, doubtless, in this camp, that the women and children had been placed to be out of the way of stray bullets. A close inspection showed that the holes had been scooped out of the hill side and covered over, into which they could crawl and escape the bursting shells."

Dumont's sworn notarized statement says this:

'The fourth day, May 12, at about two o'clock in the afternoon, on exact instructions given by those who betraved us, that we have no more ammunition, the troops advanced and our boys came out of their trenches; and it was then that they were killed; Jose Ouellet, 93 years old; Jose Vandal, two arms broken, but finished with a bayonet, 75 years old; Donald Ross, mortally wounded by pierced by a bayonet, also very old; Isadore Boyer, another old man; Michael Trottier, Andre Batoche, Calixte Tourond, Elzear Tourond, John Swan, and Damase Carrier, who had a broken leg, and whom the English then dragged, a cord about his neck, tied to the tail of a horse. And there were two Sioux

The sum of these four days of bitter fighting was, for us, three wounded and twelve dead, plus a child killed, the one victim during the whole campaign of the famous Gatline machine-gun." ³²

Another of Dumont's account, and probably the last of what he had remembered as they fled:

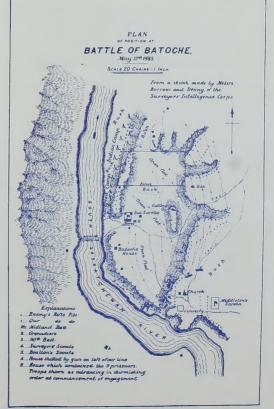


"What are we going to do", said Louis Riel to Gabriel Dumont, 'We are beaten.' Dumont replied, 'We must die, you must have known that in taking up arms, we should be defeated." "Very well, they must destroy

The accounts of the people that were in the battles clearly indicated that the Metis Army was well organized. Their tactics used throughout the three battles were guerilla warfare,

hit and run techniques. There is enough evidence in the history books to show that if Dumont had had his way the Metis would probably have won the battles. The Rebel force defence line was so strong that it took Middleton four days to

The Metis had the Canadian Army under control until they ran out of ammunition.



Plan of position at Battle of Batoche, Saskatchewan Archives Board.

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